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Paper 112

Lingua franca onset in a superdiverse neighborhood: Oecumenical Dutch in Antwerp

by

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**Lingua franca onset in a superdiverse neighborhood:
ecumenical Dutch in Antwerp**

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Introduction

I arrive at my Moroccan barber. He is standing outside his shop, talking to an elderly man.
While I install myself in his chair he tells me what's up:

Mo:

Die meneer [wijst naar de deur] – nu – vakantie

In Turkiye

Zijn vrouw – eerst twee dagen goed [twee vingers opgestoken]

Dan dag drie dag vier niet goed – ziek worden

Naar kliniek – dood! [wegwerpgebaar]

JB:

Amai! Dat is erg! Misschien hart? [hand op de borst]

Mo:

Ja hart stopt

JB:

Oy oy oy. Hoe oud was zij?

Mo:

Vrouw? Misschien vierenzestig

Zij geen kinderen hé – alleen één zoon [één vinger omhoog]
Maar weg – trouwen – andere kant [wegwerpgebaar]
Niet komen naar mama hé [schudt hoofd]

Translation:

Mo:

That gentleman [points to door] – now – holiday
In Turkiye
His wife – first two days good [two fingers in the air]
Then day three day four not good – being ill
To hospital – dead! [dismissing gesture]

JB:

Wow! that is bad! Maybe heart? [places hand on chest]

Mo:

Yes, heart stops

JB:

Oy oy oy. How old was she?

Mo:

Wife? Maybe sixty four
They no children, right – just one son [one finger up]
But gone – marrying – other side [dismissive gesture]
Not come to mama, right [shakes head]

My barber, whom I shall call Mohamed (“Mo” in the transcript), is in his mid-forties and immigrated nine years ago from Tanger to Antwerp. His family remained in Tanger, and Mohamed uses short breaks in the working year to visit them. He works with two associates, also recent and direct immigrants from the Tanger area in Morocco. None of the three barbers in the shop can be said to be “fluent” in Dutch, and they interact among each other in Arabic

peppered with occasional Dutch or French loanwords.¹ When the shop is empty, the TV is tuned to Arabic-medium entertainment or religious programs; whenever I enter the shop, the channel is changed to Dutch TV.

Mohamed's barber shop is in Statiestraat, the central axis of a "superdiverse" neighborhood in the inner-city Antwerp district of Berchem (see Blommaert 2013). While his shop would frequently welcome Moroccan friends for a chat and coffee, Mohamed's customers represent a cross-section of the highly volatile demography of the area: local "native" (often elderly) Belgians mingle with Moroccan, Turkish, Indian, Eastern-European and African customers. The lingua franca in the shop is Dutch – at least, a range of very elementary forms of Dutch. Mohamed and his associates have no knowledge of English, and their proficiency in French is equally limited. Customers to his shop display a broad range of degrees of fluency in Dutch, from fully proficient native Antwerp dialect to almost nothing. For the latter, Mohammed has compiled a sort of scrap book with pictures from magazines showing different haircut styles; when verbal interaction about the desired services fails, the scrapbook is brought on and customers point to the pictures closest to their preference – after which Mohamed and his two associates get down to work. Verbal interaction in Dutch is in itself usually limited to brief questions about the preferred haircut: "kort?" "hier beetje lang?" "Met machine ook?" ("short?", "a bit long here?" "With machine [hair trimmer] as well?"), and to occasional "small talk" about the weather or other topics Goffman famously qualified as "safe currency".

When non-Moroccan customers arrive, all three barbers greet them in chorus with a local-colloquial expression "alles goe?" ("everything all right?"); when such customers are chatty – something rather frequent with elderly native customers – Mohamed and his associates perform Dutch backchanneling routines ("really?" "yes", "right", "oh my god", "no problem") but abstain from extensive conversational engagement. This might occasion amusing sequences, such as the following, in which an elderly native customer (Cu) asks a rather direct question to Mohamed (Mo):

Cu:

Zeg wat is dat daar allemaal met die moslims vandaag de dag? Al die miserie?

¹ One of Mohamed's associates, remarkably, uses *English* "thank you" instead of the Dutch thanking routine "dank u". Observe also that Mohamed uses the *Turkish* word for "Turkey" ("Turkiye"), an effect of language contact.

Mo:

Ja – jaaaa

Cu:

Ja gij verstaat mij niet hé

Mo:

Hmmm

Translation:

Cu:

Say, what's all that with Muslims these days? All that misery?

Mo:

Yes, yeaaaah

Cu:

You don't understand me, do you?

Mo:

Hmmmm

The sociolinguistic regime in operation in Mohamed's barber shop is not exceptional in Statiestraat: it is the rule. In the highly flexible and dynamic sociocultural environment characterizing this superdiverse neighborhood, a complex of non-native Dutch forms which I shall group under the term "oecumenical Dutch" has become the lingua franca. It is good to know that in Flanders-Belgium, where a strong monoglot ideology surrounds discourses about Dutch and its role in society, migration is often presented as "a threat to Dutch". The "diversification of diversity" (Vertovec 2007) is presented as an erosion of the unchallengeable position of Dutch as the language of all business, public and private – a floodgate of multilingualism in which global lingua francae such as English, French, Spanish, Russian or Mandarin Chinese will ultimately prevail. In Statiestraat, no evidence for this

claim is present; on the contrary – what we see is an unquestioned hegemony of oecumenical Dutch as the vernacular for almost any form of cross-ethnolinguistic interaction. Note, however, that this oecumenical Dutch is an *unstable* and *dynamic* given – it is an *elastic* sociolinguistic phenomenon and not a “variety” of Dutch in the sense often attributed to that term in traditions such as those of “World Englishes” (e.g. Brutt-Griffler 2002). We are not witnessing the birth of a new “dialect” or “sociolect”; we are observing a permanent sociolinguistic process of considerable complexity revolving around a volatile social structure articulating itself by means of an equally volatile communicative instrumentarium. Not the *medium* of communication is our central concern, but the *patterns* of communicative activity.

The view that I shall elaborate in this paper is that attention to such emergent and intrinsically unstable patterns of communication may tell us a thing or two about the foundations of contemporary sociolinguistics. In particular, it shows us how unstable social formations can still develop effective and structured sociolinguistic modes – something that may begin to inform us about the core of the “interaction of language and social life” (Hymes 1972). I shall address these patterns of communication as forms of “creative adaptation” and “systems in their own right” (to adopt Hymes’s (1971: 3) famous words), rather than as deviations from some rule or ideal of language usage. In what follows, I shall first sketch the characteristics of superdiversity, as articulated in Statiestraat; after which I shall briefly characterize several forms of Dutch operating there. This will then lead us to reflections on sociolinguistic systems as *complex* and *open* systems in which ephemeral structures of conviviality provide a degree of social cohesion not easily perceived when applying more traditional modes of social and sociolinguistic analysis. I expect that some people may find these reflections applicable to the study of early stages of language-contact-induced change, pidginization and creolization, but shall not, by lack of demonstrable expertise, enter into elaborate argumentation in that direction.

Sociolinguistic superdiversity

Two historically (and accidentally) concurrent forces have had a profound impact on sociolinguistic environments across the globe. The historical period in which both occurred is the early 1990s, and the forces are (1) the end of the Cold War and (2) the emergence and widespread use of the Internet. Together, these forces have had an impact on *patterns of mobility in the world*, affecting, naturally, the demographic make-up of societies as well as the

ways in which members of such societies organize communication and information exchange, and the social effects thereof, in their lives.

The end of the Cold War involved the end of a model of “zoning” in the world, which ensured – to use a simple example – that cars with Romanian or Ukrainian license plates would never be seen on highways in Western Europe, students from the People’s Republic of China at Western-European and American universities would be fewer in number than students from Taiwan, and that multinational businesses based in “the West” had only very limited activities in countries belonging to the “Communist Bloc”, as it was then known. A flight from Brussels to Tokyo would stop in Anchorage then, whereas it would now routinely cross airspace formerly controlled by the Soviet Union. New routes of physical mobility became available, and new forms of migration used these routes, now including a vast range of different modalities, motives and backgrounds for migration, from commuter-like temporary to residential migration, from fully legal relocation to clandestine immigration and asylum applications, and from unskilled to highly qualified elite migrants (Vertovec 2007). And as for the Internet: it has dramatically influenced the ways in which we organize our communicative and knowledge economies, our group affiliations and memberships, our identities and our patterns of social conduct, enabling us (including the new migrants) to arrive at that spacetime compression characterizing Castells’s (1996) “network society” (for discussions see Burke 2000; Varis 2014). The Sri Lankan lady in whose Statiestraat grocery I buy my cigarettes has a tablet on her counter now, with skype open the day round, by means of which she continuously communicates in Tamil with her relatives in Sri Lanka while she serves me in her elementary form of Dutch.

Sociolinguistically, this new dimension of globalization demands a new theoretical and analytical framework (Blommaert 2010, 2014a; Blommaert & Rampton 2011). With the fact of mobility now staring us in the face, the implicit assumption of stable and sedentary “speech communities” present in older and mainstream sociolinguistic models – a strong bias in favor of the “local” in description and explanation – could no longer be applied to adequately address phenomena in which issues of *scale* (from strictly local to several degrees of “translocal”) are apparent. Elementary processes of meaning-making – “communication” – likewise have been caught in an imagery in which face-to-face verbal interaction between (physically copresent) members of a community in which linguistic, social and cultural codes were widely shared. Such images, naturally, fell short of addressing the complex forms of on- and offline communication we now witness. For one thing, visual-graphic literacy has acquired a new and sometimes puzzling dynamics in online and mobile communication,

pushing sociolinguists to abandon the “primacy” of verbal language as the locus of authentic and creative expression (Lillis 2013; Varis & Blommaert 2014). And as for verbal interaction, the simple shopping routine described above – with me buying cigarettes in my local Sri Lankan grocery – involves a participant framework in which family members half a world away are co-present as overhearers, and entering my neighborhood shop now involves engaging in a multilingual environment – Dutch and Tamil simultaneously enacted in different but coordinated practices, with language contact phenomena due to their presence and deployment – not hitherto witnessed. The Goffmanian “situation” has been considerably complicated by the communicative economies of superdiversity.

Similarly, well-known language-contact phenomena understood, conventionally, as code-switching have become vastly more complex in this new context of mobility (Rampton 1995; Sharma & Rampton 2011). A framework in which language contact phenomena are *a priori* defined in terms of “languages” (known and countable objects such as “English” or “Swahili”) quickly proved to be inadequate for addressing the intense and often ludic forms of “linguaging” performed by people in superdiverse contexts, in which people use *specific resources, functionally allocated* in view of *communicative effect*, in patterns of *enregisterment* not clearly connected to conventionally understood “languages” (Jørgensen et al 2011; Creese & Blackledge 2010; also Agha 2007). A substantive qualification of the notion of “language” itself is inevitable, along with a thorough critique of almost every assumption about “knowledge of language” in relation to “use of language” (Rampton 1995, 2006; also Blommaert 2012). People are more comfortably described in terms of the actual *repertoires* they control – the concrete, specific and functionally specialized complexes of communitive resources they can deploy in specific social arenas (Blommaert & Backus 2013; Rymes 2014). This, in turn, undercuts the assumption of “sharedness” in communication – a cornerstone of much discourse analysis – and so questions established understandings of (degrees of) “belonging” to a “community” of speakers (Silverstein 1996, 2014; Rampton 1998). Accepting mobility as a key aspect of sociolinguistic phenomena, we can see, dislodges a broad range of central and deeply entrenched linguistic and sociolinguistic concepts, suggesting *complexity* as a perspective for addressing language in society: a focus on uncertainty and indeterminacy, on nonlinearity and multifiliarity in sociolinguistic outcomes (Arnaut 2013; Blommaert 2014a, 2014b).

Methodologically, the upshot of this emerging complexity perspective is that we now look ethnographically – that is, without much taken for granted – at actually deployed communicative resources of which the function (and, thus, their possible effects) remains to

be determined *in actual practice*. Determining such functions is evidently not a linguistic job alone: it involves an examination of the actual, deeply historical and political sociocultural (contextual) embeddedness of communicative patterns (Rampton, Maybin & Roberts 2014; Silverstein 2014). This concern aligns scholars of sociolinguistic superdiversity with the tradition of pidgin and creole studies – a set of objects of which the analysis could also not circumvent the specific sociohistorical and political circumstances of emergence, distribution and use (Hymes 1971). Linguistically, the story of superdiversity is rather quickly told; their *sociolinguistic* story, however, is quite something else. Let us now have a look at such phenomena as they occur in Statiestraat.

Oecumenical Dutch in Statiestraat

I documented Statiestraat and its adjacent area in Blommaert (2013) and must refer the reader to that book for broader sociological, historical and demographic information. In short, Statiestraat is the central axis of a formerly working-class inner-city district in Southeast Antwerp, currently densely populated by a mix of (a) a “native” Belgian, elderly working class population; (b) a very recently immigrated “native” Belgian layer of young, relatively affluent middle-class families; (c) a large resident Turkish immigrant community, present since the 1970s, active in commerce and catering as well as (d) more recently, higher-ranked service provision (medical, financial, insurance, legal, real estate services) offered by the younger generation of Turkish immigrants, (e) a number of smaller resident groups, present since the 1990s, consisting of Moroccan, Eastern European and African immigrants; (f) a very volatile layer of “transit” immigrants, from Latin America, various parts of East, Southeast and Central Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe. The area is known, in policy circles, as a “problem district” due to higher-than-average unemployment and lower-than-average income, low-value property and a significant amount of vacant commercial space. Sociolinguistically, culturally and socially, the neighborhood is outspokenly *polycentric*, with several different and dynamic groups orienting towards different centers of normative conduct and “normalcy” – the lives of “native” double income families are governed by entirely different rules and constraints than those of clandestine immigrants from Georgia or Iraq, for instance. That, too, is often perceived as a comfort and security challenge.

Given the extreme diversity of the social and demographic makeup of the area, and the rapid changes of its composition especially in segments (e) and (f) above, the area is characterized by a flexible and highly dynamic *infrastructure*. “Ethnic” shops are started and

discontinued at a rapid pace, shops may relocate repeatedly (qualifying the impression of “vacant” commercial space: shops often relocate conjuncturally, depending on the amount of business they attract), and change ownership without advance notification to its customers. Shops and catering services range from extremely cheap – targeting the “transit” immigrants mentioned above – to fashionable and boutique – targeting the new middle class described in (b) above. The infrastructure of the neighborhood, including its propensity towards rapid and unpredictable change, closely follows the socio-demographic dynamics of the area.

A conspicuous, and characteristic, part of this infrastructure is a concentration of new religious facilities: never less than 10 and a maximum of 16 (figures fluctuate according to the dynamics just described) new “churches” operate in Statiestraat, all of them evangelical-charismatic and run by immigrants of the (e) and (f) categories above: Nigerians, Congolese, Brazilian, Peruvian pastors run weekly services often attracting hundreds of followers. These followers, in a first stage, are mostly “ethnic”: Brazilians attend the Brazilian church, Congolese the Congolese church, and so forth. The language by means of which churches communicate in that stage would be the “ethnic” language (e.g. Brazilian Portuguese), including customary regional *lingua francae* (e.g. English in the Nigerian church). When churches are well established, however, we notice that they address a broader constituency; and interestingly, they do so through the medium of Dutch. Consider Figure 1.

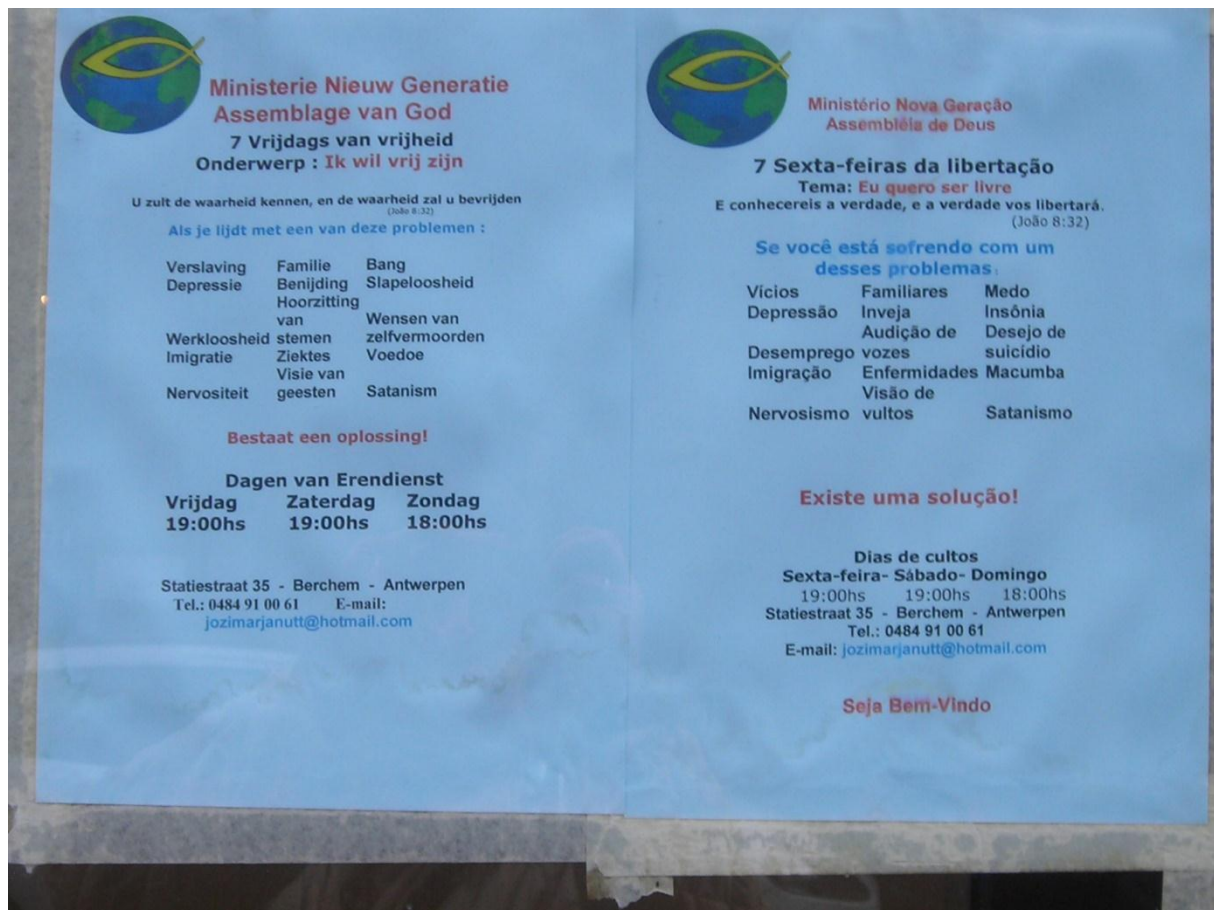


Figure 1: “Assemblage of God”

This double A4 poster could be found in 2007 on the window of a former shop now turned into a Brazilian place of worship. It is an example of “symmetrical bilingualism” in which everything that is written in the source language (Brazilian Portuguese on the right) is “mirrored” in the target language (Dutch on the left). The Dutch, however, is quite curious. “Assembleia”, for instance, is translated as “assemblage” – a term applicable to what happens in a Volvo factory, for instance – rather than as the Dutch equivalent of “assembly” (“gemeenschap”). Other examples confirm the suspicion that an automatic translator application has been used by someone whose personal command of Dutch is very limited. Thus we read “hoorzittingen van stemmen” where one would expect “het horen van stemmen”. Portuguese “audicao” is, like its English equivalent “hearing”, ambivalent and can mean both “the act of hearing” as registering acoustic signals, and “a hearing” as in a court procedure or an administrative process. “Hoorzittingen” in the Brazilian Church’s poster is equivalent to the formal, administrative “hearing”.

Notwithstanding the “truncated” nature of the Dutch used here, its function is clear: it serves the purpose of signaling – indexically – that non-Portuguese members are welcome.

And in spite of the lexical, syntactic and orthographic shortcomings of the Dutch messages, *they do the job*. Consider now Figure 2. In 2012, the same Brazilian church relocated to a renovated spacious building elsewhere in Statiestraat. The simple home-printed A4 posters have been replaced by professionally manufactured ones, and the Dutch now deployed on the poster is fully normatively “correct”. In the years separating both moments, the church successfully attracted numbers of “native” Dutch-speaking faithful; this increase in available in-house linguistic resources explains the difference in “language quality” between both illustrations.



Figure 2: Assembleia de Deus, 2012.

Through examples such as those in Figures 1 and 2, we already see a number of things with respect to Dutch in this superdiverse neighborhood. One: we see that Dutch linguistic and literacy resources are very unevenly distributed. The posters in Figure 1 were, as suggested, manufactured by someone with very limited access to standard Dutch resources; the poster in Figure 2 reflects “native” maximal competence. Two: The function of Dutch is *to recruit and invite* people across local (and in the case of churches, even wider) boundaries of ethnolinguistic groups. This is why I qualify it as “oecumenical”: it signals an openness to people not belonging to a specific group in the area.

Whereas the second remark, about function, suggests stability, the first remark suggests instability, the presence of very different realizations of oecumenical Dutch. In fact, we best speak of a *gradient of realizations*, ranging from “minimal” to “maximum” fluency in both spoken and written forms, and all of them inevitably “accented” by features of background and “indexical biography” (the trajectories by means of which repertoires are built). “Accent” must be taken literally here. In discussing my barber Mohamed, above, I mentioned that Mohamed and his two associates greet customers with a colloquialized routine expression “Alles goe?”, which carries obvious Antwerp dialect traces. Similar features could be observed in routine exchanges elsewhere: the transactional phrases that regulate simple shopping practices – greetings, repeating the customer’s demand, stating the price of goods, saying goodbye – often carry local dialect inflections. Such local accent features disappear when simple routines are broken and people must answer more impromptu questions such as “How’s your daughter doing at school?” Thus, while the restricted routine forms of professional interaction suggest a degree of local fluency, discourse in other, less routinized domains quickly bumps into the limits of proficiency.

Accent also occurs in writing. Figure 3 shows posters on the window of a call shop run by people from the Indian subcontinent and announces cheap rates for calls to specific countries. It is hard to determine the “language” in which the country names are written, as “Sut Afrika”, “Tunesea” or “Turky” are neither Dutch, French nor English forms. This is “linguaging”. There is one exception though: “Peiro” is an accurate reflection of local accented pronunciation of “Peru” as [pæru:] (where [æ] is written as “ei”). “Peru” is written in the Antwerp dialect – a resource cheaply available in the area. And *it works*.

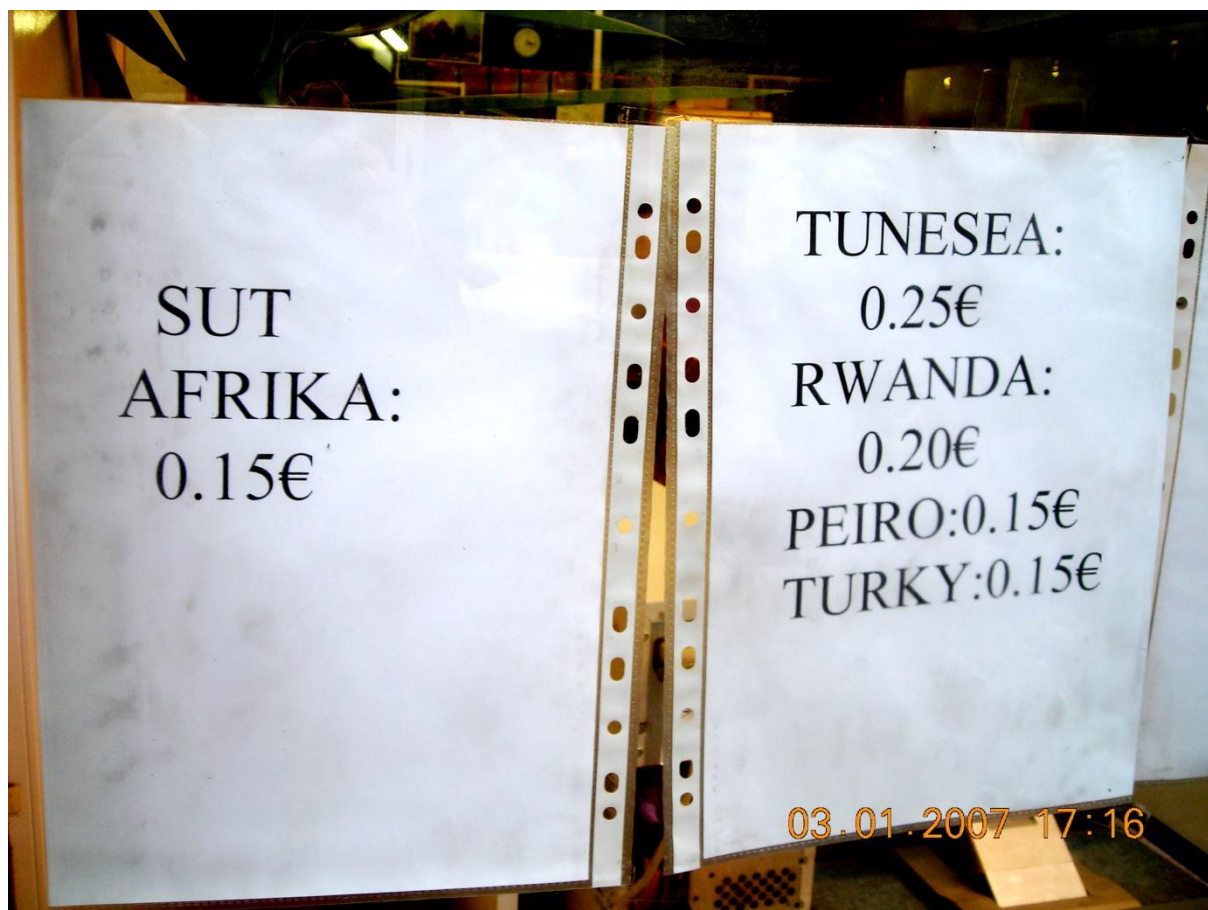


Figure 3: “Peiro”.

On the other end of the specter, nonnative accents shine through even in spite of longitudinal residence and advanced educational achievements. In Figure 4, we see part of the lettering on the window of a Turkish-owned financial services business in Statiestraat. The shop is owned by a member of that upwardly mobile and highly qualified younger generation of the Turkish community, and specializes in rather sophisticated financial and insurance products. Yet, the phrase “hipothecaire lening” (“mortgage”) contains an orthographic error: normative Dutch would impose “hypothecaire lening” (with “y” reflecting its ancient Greek origins). Note that the owner was educated and trained in an entirely Dutch-medium school trajectory; in spite of this, the “immigrant accent” is there. It bears repeating that the presence of Dutch, here as elsewhere, has the same indexical function: it invites customers other than those belonging to a specific ethnolinguistic group (Turkish in this case). And again, *it works*.



Figure 4: “Hypotheaire lening”.

Ocumenical Dutch, then, is a gradient of differentially distributed resources rather than one particular variety; its stability can be found in the function it serves – it is the “demotic” medium of interaction in the neighborhood, one that includes everyone and excludes no one. Its actual realizations may differ enormously *linguistically*, but remain *indexically* and therefore *functionally* recognizable as a medium signaling openness towards everyone. Not much Dutch is required for this indexical transparency – the signal is not given through degrees of “correctness” or fluency, it is given through the deployment of *any* form of Dutch.

And it works: I repeatedly emphasized that. In order to further underscore this, let me return to the vignette with which I opened this essay. My barber Mohamed, I reported, had been talking to an elderly gentleman as I approached his shop. The gentleman was a Turkish immigrant residing in the neighborhood for several years, the husband of the lady who tragically deceased during their joint holiday in Turkey. The Turkish gentleman is fluent in Turkish and has some proficiency in (colloquial and accented) Dutch; the repertoire of his interlocutor Mohamed has been described earlier. Their conversation, consequently, was in their respective varieties of Dutch. The restricted character of those varieties did not prevent

this conversation from being “successful”, though: Mohamed was able to report the story he had learned from the man to me, and to punctuate his factually accurate report with equally appropriate nonverbal expressions of conversational involvement and empathy, in such a way that it triggered conversational collaboration from me – a “native” proficient speaker of Dutch. Mohamed’s limited proficiency in Dutch was sufficient to sustain intentional and goal-directed interactional involvement with a Turkish-language resident as well as with a Dutch-language resident of his neighborhood.

Mohamed’s neighbor is a grocery run by a couple from Gujarat, India. Husband and wife have, like many others, a thematically specialized proficiency in Dutch (speaking a variety that betrays a Netherlands accent) enabling the fluent handling of the commercial routines in their shop. Mohamed, like most barbers, has local newspapers and magazines in his shop, and the Indian grocer has made a habit of picking up one of the newspapers and returning it shortly afterwards – an occasion on which he customarily engages in a brief discussion with Mohamed on the main topics in today’s news. I witnessed several such events but was never able to record them; but such events, whenever observed, never failed to astonish me: two people controlling very different, but equally restricted, levels of proficiency in Dutch engage in a pretty accurate and relatively detailed discussion of social events (sufficiently “Dutch” to enable me to chip in a remark or two, occasionally), and achieve a level of understanding through such interactional engagements. It shows the elasticity of their “language” and the fact that paucity of linguistic resources can still be accompanied by what Hymes (1996) called “functional plenitude”.

Observe, in conclusion, that these forms of oecumenical Dutch are not new in the neighborhood. My data collection includes data with a time depth of over a decade now, and the range of features has remained unaltered throughout that period. Since I started recording examples, I continuously observed extreme differences in proficiency reflecting a very uneven pattern of distribution of Dutch language resources in the area; I also continuously observed intensive deployment of very different levels of Dutch fluency, their connection to specific speech occasions and thematic domains such as commercial transactions and “small talk”, as well as their efficacy in such actual instances of interaction. No sign of normative focusing or tightening has ever been recorded – every new group of inhabitants of the area appears to rapidly pick up whatever is available in the way of oecumenical Dutch, and to integrate rather quickly into the “speech community” in which it is used. Note that this latter notion deserves its scare quotes, of course – see earlier remarks on this topic. But we shall see, nonetheless, that a level of “community” is effectively at play here.

Oecumenical Dutch and conviviality

The “functional plenitude” mentioned above, I would argue, transcends the strictly communicative-interactional production of meaning: it also creates and recreates a level of social structure we call “conviviality” (Blommaert 2013, *etc.*). Conviviality refers to a low-intensity but nevertheless very real (and important) level of social cohesion characterized by the avoidance of conflict and a “live and let live” attitude. While it is very often dismissed as a relatively superficial level of social structuring, it should not be underestimated as to scope and impact (remember Goffman’s *Behavior in Public Places*). Conviviality, in a superdiverse neighborhood such as Statiestraat, is the general “key” within which people interact with each other, and it is this key that prevents or aborts conflicts in an environment where almost any feature of people might lead to disapproval, misunderstanding or disqualification. Note that this level of conviviality does not cancel or even mitigate very non-convivial realities: as mentioned, the superdiversity of the area is accompanied by severe and outspoken forms of socio-economic inequality, with fully enfranchised citizens – people such as myself – living next to people whose clandestine presence excludes them from any form of social or economic benefit and forces them into often shameful forms of labor and housing exploitation. Conviviality is a *level* of social structure, not *the* social structure.

The point is, however, that conviviality in this neighborhood is heavily reliant on the widespread use of oecumenical Dutch as a lingua franca for cross-group interaction. Oecumenical Dutch, in that sense, is the infrastructure that supports the level of social cohesion that turns the superdiverse neighborhood into a relatively pleasant and comfortable environment. And it does so not because of *linguistic stability* – that old assumption in which people were supposed to produce understandable meanings to the extent that they stuck to a stable and fully shared code – but because of *sociolinguistic stability*. It is the recognizability of oecumenical Dutch *as an indexical* that shapes the convivial key in which people can comfortably engage with each other. The shared order of indexicality projected, emblematically, onto a “language”, Dutch, regulates communicative traffic. We see an ‘elastic’ sociolinguistic system in which a broad range of linguistic and sociolinguistic non-standard features can be deployed, and in which pragmatic and metapragmatic adequacy (communicability) appears to dominate deployment. The perspective of deployment is, thus, functional and polynormative rather than mononormative and “linguistic” (in the sense of oriented towards a stable and controlled image of “language”). Tendencies over time also do

not show processes of normative tightening of focusing. The lingua franca is, thus, a continuum of alternatively ordered features rather than a “language” in the classical sense of the term. And these alternatively ordered features are kept together, in view of communicability, by a shared order of indexicality.

It is this insight – that a lingua franca such as oecumenical Dutch operates as an order of indexicality, not as a language – that offers relevance for sociolinguistic research beyond its own confines. We are in a position to make statements about fundamental processes of social structuration, and the insights to be gathered from this afford generalizations at the level of social and cultural theory. What then about linguistics? The profound and systemic instability of oecumenical Dutch as a linguistic system would undoubtedly raise problems for anyone tempted to describe its manifestations as the formation of a new “dialect” or “sociolect”. Such attempts would be doomed to fail, because they are attempts to describe what is effectively an open and complex *sociolinguistic* system as a closed, “language”-like and rule-governed system. Such attempts would not just fail to do justice descriptively to the levels of variation apparent in the realizations of the “language”; they would fail to capture the fundamentals of what is there: that we are addressing actual, situated communicative practices, deeply contextualized in an unstable and fractured “context-within-contexts”, the effects of which are *social and cultural* and bear just distant traces of the linguistic encoding by means of which they were performed. This, evidently, reminds us of the big debates in pidgin and creole studies over the past decades, and the study of ephemeral and highly unstable patterns of communication such as the ones described in this essay may carry some relevance for these debates – which should therefore never be closed.

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